

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Under Prairie Skies: The Plants and Peoples of the Northern Plains

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1hc0c5tf>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 47(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Myhal, Natasha

Publication Date

2024-12-01

DOI

10.17953/A3.34839

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Under Prairie Skies: The Plants and Peoples of the Northern Plains. By C. Thomas Shay. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022. 332 pages. \$29.95 paper; \$29.95 ebook.

Under Prairie Skies is a contemporary ethnobotanical text. C. Thomas Shay provides a close reading of the Northern Plains prairie landscape and how Native American peoples utilized this environment in a multitude of ways. Readers who are interested in the intersections of archeology, ethnobotany, and Native American uses of plants would find value in this text. The author states at the beginning that the text's goal is to portray Native life before Europeans came, highlighting the close connections Native peoples have with the environment. With the reliance on ethnographic accounts, the author cautions the reader that this text does not intend to freeze Native peoples in time or romanticize them. The author also includes contemporary Native stories and Native American authors.

The text is organized in three ways: the first part is a glacial history of the Great Plains region and climatic influences on plant distribution; the second analyzes the science behind the story; the third sheds light on the various ways plants were used in daily life. This book demonstrates the environment as an archive with thousands of years of history within our lands and waters. Each chapter is both visual and descriptive, with many landscape photos included throughout. At the end of each chapter, the author offers further reading recommendations with attention given to ethnobotanical books written by Native authors.

Chapter one details how glaciers shaped the land. An overview of glacial geology is provided in which Shay emphasizes the ways frozen rocks embedded in glaciers affected the environment, acting "like oversized sandpaper, grinding soft rock into flour and leaving scratches on hard rock to mark their passing" (8). Accounts such as this played a major role in the shaping of our environment. The chapter scientifically accounts for the changes in the landscape when the glaciers began to recede, creating waterways that supported animal and plant life. Waterways within the Northern Plains appear in each chapter. Each chapter thereafter accounts for Native peoples as active actors within this region.

Moving on from glaciers, chapter two opens with the author's account of the Northern Plains' violent weather and discusses how weather materialized on the plains from rain, droughts, and blizzards. Here, Shay begins to illustrate Native accounts of weather. For example, Anishinaabe author Basil Johnston's accounts are included, which illuminate the importance of weather in Native oral traditions and literature. This chapter notes the connection between the Thunderbird and weather patterns, as told by Melvin Gilmore, and ultimately demonstrates how prairies, with a multitude of weather patterns, became homes for Native peoples.

In chapter three, Shay discusses the sacredness of the land through narrating a scenic route from southern Saskatchewan to Des Moines, Iowa, during the summer's flowering season. Shay includes a Watchemonne (Ioway) accounting of the land around the Ioway River, filled with dirt lodges, homes, and mounds (43). The author notes that many of these sites are gone today, but the intention of this chapter is to follow their trails, now roads and highways, and attempt to understand life during that time. The author documents observations following various river systems along this path, addressing important sites still present, such as Saskatchewan's Moose Mountain Medicine Wheel and *Omaskoozo-zaaga'igan*, meaning Elk Lake—known today as Itasca State Park in Minnesota. Shay adamantly includes Native words for places or rivers and the various plants described in this chapter. The prairies found within the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers are what the author describes as both being alive and a busy place filled with many animals. The end of this chapter closes with a reminder to remember the rich Native heritage of this region, and to not solely rely on the European newcomer's accounts or interpretations.

Chapters four and five integrate the author's own archeological research and the ways Native peoples interacted with plants. In chapter four, Shay again is focused on one prairie river, the Souris (or Mouse) that originates in Weyburn, Saskatchewan. The focus on that river highlights the author's own research of applying scientific techniques to study archeological materials, which illuminates the past in different ways (82). In chapter five, Shay discusses the importance of plants such as squash, goosefoot, sunflower, buckwheat, and corn, and the introduction of plant domestication. Again, the author notes how Europeans witnessed Native peoples tending to plants through various methods. One such example is Native peoples' use of setting and controlling wild land fires.

Chapters six and seven focus on Native American people's use of prairie plants through ethnographic accounts. The author relies on Melvin Gilmore's ethnography on Buffalo Bird Woman (Mandan-Hidatsa) to share what was remembered during the early growing season. Chapter six describes how plants and crops were cultivated and the roles of family members in those activities. Shay describes how plants were used to add flavor to hot cooking, noting Native people's creativity (139). Native American spirituality and tradition through the use of plants is the focus of chapter seven, using Gilbert Wilson's accounts that describe Edward Goodbird (Hidatsa) using sage to brush himself after emptying his fish trap (143). The power, both healing and spiritual, is the focus of this chapter, and Shay notes that these plants have sustained Native American peoples for centuries.

The last chapter describes how Native American peoples used local, natural materials, noting the spiritual significance of the plants and Native peoples' respect toward them, regardless of their use. An interesting example in this chapter was the flexibility of willow wood to make baskets, mats, and fish traps. Mandan and Hidatsa peoples created funnel-shaped pens with willow wood to catch sturgeon and catfish in the Missouri River (159). There is also a discussion on the role of homes, such as tipis and earth lodges, on the plains. It is fitting for this chapter to circle back to the importance of birch-bark canoes, enabling trade and transportation on waterways.

Throughout this text, Shay sought to rely on Native oral traditions to describe life on the Northern Plains before Europeans arrived. The inclusion of these stories and the discussion of environmental changes endured in this landscape complements contemporary ethnobotanical literature. Overall, *Under Prairie Skies* would have been stronger with a critical discussion of the ethnographies consulted and the broader connection to colonialism and salvage anthropology. Although Shay mentions at the beginning of the book his intention to avoid romanticizing Native knowledge, we do not know if the information retrieved during the salvage anthropology era was done so under duress nor if the whole story is included in what ethnographers wrote down and published.

Shay makes visible the role Native cultural traditions played in shaping the Northern Plains. This text should be used as a point of departure for general readers interested in Native American plant use of the Northern Plains. Ultimately, this text offers important reflections on the relationships between Native American peoples and their environment. This text can be further expanded in the future and shows the importance of corroborating Native stories and histories.

Natasha Myhal

Ohio State University